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Paul in Prison

What was prison like in the days of Paul? The purpose of imprisonment in the Roman world was neither reform nor punishment; it was simply a way to confine those awaiting judgment. Prisoners were held prior to trial; once a verdict was rendered, they might be executed, beaten, or sent into exile, but normally they would not be sentenced to more time in captivity.

In terms of physical accommodations, most prison cells were basically dungeons—dark, dank facilities where people could be kept captive, often in chains, until the authorities were ready to deal with them. Sometimes, however, respectable individuals could be held under a form of “house arrest,” guarded by soldiers but allowed a relative measure of comfort and freedom. According to the book of Acts, Paul experienced both the best (28:16, 30–31) and the worst (16:23–24) of these possible forms of captivity at different points in his career (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23).

In Philippians, Paul says that he is “in chains” (1:7, 13, 14, 17; the Greek word *desmos*, translated “imprisonment” in many English Bibles, actually means “chain”). Is he literally in chains, or does he mean that in a metaphorical sense? Many interpreters think that his ability to converse with his colleagues, receive gifts, and dictate this letter implies something closer to house arrest. Whatever the

conditions, imprisonment always brought social disgrace, casting aspersions on the prisoner's reputation and generating a significant loss of honor. Paul tries to turn this factor to his own ironic advantage: he will not be put to shame if his own humiliation results in the exaltation of Christ (1:20).

The New Testament contains four other letters that indicate they were written by Paul from prison: Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and 2 Timothy. Together with Philippians, the five books are sometimes called the "captivity epistles" or the "prison letters."